

Linda Cook

## A Leap of Faith Preservation with ISTEA Funding

(Top right and below) Church of the Holy Ascension NHL, Unalaska, AK. Project nearing completion 1996.

All photos by Roger Hunter, International Steel Erectors, Anchorage, AK.



Church of the Holy Ascension NHL, Unalaska, AK. While re-siding the bell tower, carpenters realized that the old boards masked the real structural problem—water damage had rotted away the interior construction. Carpenters (l-r) Martin Nowka, Roger Hunter, Dave Rose, Campbell McLaughlin, and Joe Patrone strung the tower to anchor the top.

**I**n the morning of September 15, 1996, over 200 people packed the nave and small interior chapels of the Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Church.

The congregation gathered to attend the rare consecration service performed for its new altar fashioned from timbers replaced in the rehabilitation of the 1895 structure. The ceremony marked the completion of Phase I of the rehabilitation of the historic church, which had been seriously deteriorating for over 10 years. The first church had been constructed on the site in 1826 by Father Ioann Veniaminov, who later became the Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia.

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1970, Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Cathedral faced a dubious future by the late 1980s. Severe Aleutian storms which routinely hurl 100-mile-per hour winds and damage from neglect during World War II had begun to take a toll on the aging frame building. A Condition Assessment of the Cathedral by the NPS in 1986 first

called attention to its rapidly-deteriorating condition. The church has been listed in the National Park Service's annual report to Congress on damaged and threatened NHLs every year since 1986.



In 1990 the *American Heritage Magazine* included the church in its dubious list of the year's "Wrecker's Dozen"—those most likely to disappear over the next decade.

In addition to a leaking roof and rotting foundation which were allowing water damage to the church's irreplaceable icons and furnishings, the contractors uncovered a structural problem in the bell tower that immediately escalated both the cost and extent of the project beyond anyone's expectations. Years of water damage and rot had completely destroyed the lower two levels of the bell tower. The exterior redwood siding was all that was holding the tower together.

Because of the NHL status of the Cathedral, the State of Alaska Department of Transportation carried most of the cost of the rehabilitation through a bold commitment of ISTEA preservation enhancement funding. Strong community and parish action, scrupulous and skilled contractors and architects—notably International Steel Erectors, Anchorage, and ECI Architects, Anchorage—and the technical assistance of the NPS and other state and federal agencies kept the project on track. In 1996, Phase I of the project was completed. The local restoration community will continue to raise funds to carry out work planned for Phase II, to upgrade the Cathedral's heating system, conserve the icons, and rehabilitate the neighboring Bishop's House.

Thanks to the Aleut Church Restoration Society and Holy Ascension Parish Council and Restoration Committee the Cathedral and its rare collection of Russian icons were placed on the 1996 World Monument Watch List of 100 most endangered sites worldwide, giving their importance and condition added recognition. The community's perseverance and hard work have paid off through the saving of the Cathedral which is a part of our national heritage.

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